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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the student-centered cluster college concept of organization employed at Oakton Community College (Illinois) and compares this approach to traditional organization by academic department or division. The advantages offered by the division structure include intradisciplinary interchange among teachers, coordinated budget building, student counseling for majors, specialized facilities, curriculum coordination, and "peer" faculty evaluation. But such a structure has major disadvantages, including uneven size, pressure groups, insularity, hindrance of interdisciplinary teaching strategies, and higher costs. The cluster concept results in lowered administrative costs, achievement of new levels of interpersonal relations by removal of artificial barriers, effective coping with rapid institutional change, student benefits derived from competing cluster offerings, and the positioning of important student services near students, rather than in remote centralized facilities. The cluster concept at Oakton, while unquestionably presenting many challenges, has proven to be efficacious and consistent with the philosophy of the college, which holds that the student is the prime factor in the educational mission of the college. (JDS)

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CLUSTERING AT OAKTON: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Richard L. Jordan

Someone no doubt holds a theory that once an organization acquires good people--and salaries are at least adequate--productivity will rise to, and remain at, a relatively high level. I suspect a further attitude is that the administrative structure is largely irrelevant to productivity as long as accountability can be maintained and management can detect and remove marginal administrators.

I am certain that no such theory can be proved. There are simply too many variables. In education this is even more true than in business. Educators, let alone the public, can seldom agree on what should be taught, even less on how it should be taught. The question of organizing or administering the teachers does not even come up. Oakton's president put that rather well:

> I've seldom heard anybody in a departmental system ask whether the system is working, or whether an alternative system would be better... The question in a departmental school is "which are the good departments."[1]

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[1] W. A. Koehnline, "External Evaluation of the Cluster System," unpublished memo, Oakton Community College, November 22, 1974.

The fact is that educational organizations are traditionally structured for the benefit of the faculty, not the administration, not the students. A university department is a power base, a regular fiefdom in the larger entity called the school, the college, or the university. I do not suggest that this is all bad, merely that departmental organization does not fit

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The student/community centered concept of a community college.

Most community college officials have recognized this from the beginning. Their substitute for the academic departments is the division, a combination of similar academic disciplines combined into an administrative unit for purposes of scheduling, budgeting, evaluation, and the like. A division is, however, only an "enlarged" version of a department. It is different primarily in that it is structured for central administrative control rather than departmental.

Oakton Community College is thus an exception. Not unique, not even all that innovative structurally, merely different from most. For nearly five years we have employed an organizational system which focuses on the students. In the beginning we called it the "group system." Now these "groups" are called "learning clusters." The names are different; the concept is the same. It was described in 1971:

> ...we have abandoned the subject or discipline as a means of organizing faculty and students for administrative purposes. Instead, we have tried to organize our faculty into "college groups" on the basis of their diversity rather than their similarity. During 1971-72 these college groups number three and each includes about 30 FTE faculty, people whose single most important commonality is that they are teachers (more so, literally, than professors) seeking to cause learning in their students. They will work closely and individually with students assigned to their groups in devising instructional methods most suited to the student's learning mode and his curricular or occupational aim.

Members of each group participate in each-other's planning, help to write objectives and devise measurement instruments for one another, and participate in building the budget for the 1973 fiscal year. There is little temptation, as in a departmental structure, to "feather their own nests." There is increased need to explain and even defend their goals and means. At the same time each group, in relation to the college and the community at large, is a college within a college. We are thus able to "grow larger by growing smaller."[2]

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[2] R. L. Jordan, "The College Group Concept at Oakton Community College: Ends and Means," August 3, 1971.

Since that time a good many claims have been made for the cluster system. They have come from students, faculty, and administrators alike. Oakton people have written articles and given papers at scholarly meetings.[3]

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[3] See especially Harvey S. Irlen, "On the Sowing of Turnips," Community College Frontiers, Fall, 1973, Vol. II, No. 1: and R. L. Jordan, "Accountability at Oakton Community College," Accountability: Proceedings of 2nd Annual International Community College Workshop, Sarnia, Ontario, August, 1971.

At the same time there have been challenges to the system. How can disciplines budget if they are in different clusters? How can an ex-biology teacher evaluate music teaching? How can quality control be exercised within academic disciplines? All of these questions--and there have been more--have

been proper, and we have tried to face them head-on. Without wanting to be defensive, however, I suggest that they exist simply because Oakton's system is out of the mainstream, because it is different. The overriding question is "does the system work?"

The immediate answer is that we really do not know. In large measure that is because there are no standards for "working." Budgets do get done; evaluation of instruction is more extensive here than at any community college I know of, and students who have left tend to speak highly of their Oakton experiences. These and other facts and observations assure us that the system is not a failure. It does "work" in that sense. But that is hardly enough. At the risk of being pedantic, we should look carefully at the pros and cons of our organization and try to make an objective analysis. Included in such an analysis should be a look at alternate forms of organization and their implications. The latter is especially important since clustering in Illinois public community colleges seems to be declining. Moraine Valley is shifting to a more conventional system of organization and the cluster system at the College of DuPage has recently come under attack in a Texas consultant's report.

Philosophy

One approaches this subject with misgivings only because school officials tend to "pull out the stops" when discussing philosophy. All such statements lean (if not topple) toward exaggerated claims stated in the worst kind of elaborate and ornate language. Oakton's general philosophy appears at the beginning of each edition of the College Catalog and in many other documents. Particularly important is the sentence which states, "All of Oakton's courses fit curricula which prepare a student for degree

work or lead directly to a certificate or degree."[4]

[4] Oakton Community College Catalog, 1975-76, Page 8.

Specifically our goals can be stated as follows:

General

To offer general as well as specialized studies in accordance with the laws of Illinois.

To meet the educational needs of those who had failed courses or were unable to profit from earlier instruction.

To enable students to learn for human development and for fun, as well as for professions and occupations.

To enable all post-high-school members of the community to obtain the best possible education for the least possible cost.

Admissions and Student Personnel Services

To accept as students any graduates of accredited high schools, programs and space permitting.

To accept non-high-school graduates over 18 years of age if their experience and qualifications indicate that they are prepared to benefit from any of the programs or courses of instruction offered by the college.

To provide counseling services (student development) as a part of the student's daily stay at the college. Such services include personal counseling, academic advisement, testing, and transfer and occupational information and advice.

Curriculum

To provide programs of study in the several areas designated by the state:

1. Baccalaureate Oriented
2. Occupation Orientated (Career Programs)
3. Adult Education
4. General Studies (Developmental or Preparatory Courses)
5. General Education ("Core" Courses, which contribute to the liberal education of each student).

To provide transfer students with freshman and sophomore courses necessary for transfer, but to avoid slavishly following the same course outlines and approaches used by the universities.

To offer such occupational programs as are warranted within our community and desired by our students and potential students, but not to "compete" unnecessarily with nearby community colleges in areas where there are already programs with openings for out-of-district students.

To offer an adult education program which complements and supplements the existing programs in the district's two high school systems.

To design courses and programs of study so that students may enter, leave, and re-enter at their own need (i.e., when they are ready to profit and at hours during which they can attend).

To insure that every student knows the objectives and methods of every course and curriculum and to do everything possible to insure that the student achieves at least minimal mastery of courses he takes.

To furnish as much "lab" or practical application as possible in every course and curriculum offered.

To de-emphasize learning for a grade and to accent learning for mastery.

Instruction

To provide the student with choices about how he may learn the subject matter of any given course.

To promote a constant interchange of ideas among teachers about teaching modes, methods, and approaches.

To break down the old barriers between subject matters (i.e., to integrate as many subject areas as are relevant into specific courses).

To facilitate student participation in the evaluation of instructional effectiveness.

To engage in a constant evaluation of our own means and ends in the educational process.

One other published statement is particularly relevant in the recitation of OCC philosophy:

> Oakton's aim, since its opening in Fall 1970, has been to provide students with courses and programs of study designed to meet the needs of society and the needs of the individual. Already many configurations of courses are available enabling the student to prepare for practically any "major" leading to a college degree or to a job and possible career in government, business, or industry.
>
> Not all students have as their aim transfer to a senior college or employment training. For some, one course or several courses, related or seemingly unrelated, constitute the reason for coming to college. In our credit offerings and in the vast non-credit or credit equivalent options of MONACEP are many courses for these students. Cooking and antiquing are as available as French and microbiology. The aim and need of the individual student remains primary in our curriculum development process.
>
> In any given subject, Oakton tries to offer as many levels of courses, particularly beginning courses, as possible. In mathematics, for example, there are entry courses for students with limited math experiences and sequences thereafter for students who have completed advanced courses.
>
> For students less well prepared than others, the Oakton Learning Lab offers students tutoring and individual assistance,

not only in mathematics, but also in chemistry, biology, accounting, foreign languages, and in any other field where a need exists. The lab expands options available for the student who would otherwise find classes effectively closed to him.

Course and curriculum choice, however, are not the sum of Oakton's learning options. Recognizing that students have different learning abilities, likes, dislikes, and preferences, the college offers and advertises numerous alternative methods of instruction within its curriculum. Thus, in any subject where there is more than one section (alternative days, times, instructors), there is an option with regard to texts used, methods of testing, and general approach to the subject. All of this is spelled out in a document published each semester and titled The Directory of Courses. The directory is available to all students and it catalogs all of the credit courses offered. It is written by the faculty actually teaching the courses and therefore becomes a "contract" between teacher and student.

Evenness of quality and common course content are maintained although individual sections are taught differently. Each instructor knows that he or she must cover the material described in the College Catalog, published annually. The approach to the subject and course may be and usually is, different from teacher to teacher, section to section. Thus students are afforded every opportunity to choose, not only the programs and courses they wish, but also the method of instruction they feel best suits their own learning patterns and desires.

> Oakton's philosophy of quality education tailored to the needs of people is apparent and available in deed as well as in theory. It is expanding in step with the size of its student body and the wishes of the community it serves.[5]

[5] R. L. Jordan, "Choices at OCC: How To Learn...," Oakton Report, July 1973, Vol. I, No. 7.

These various statements of philosophy and goals all point toward the student as the prime factor in the college's development. The student has been, is, and will continue to be the focus of the educational mission of the college. This was apparent before the college opened its doors.[6]

[6] Meyer Kamin and Griffith MacDonald, "Survey of Community Attitudes in Relation to the Development of District #535," Feb. 3, 1970. See especially III.C.

The group, or cluster, system was conceived and developed as a means of keeping the student's needs foremost in our own planning and operation. It was, as Dr. Irlen has written,

> ...founded on a student development model that postulates an unabashed concern for the individual student as an informing principle of each College Group. In this setting, faculty members are encouraged to deal with the process of learning along with the mechanics of teaching, to consider the overlapping boundaries along with the hard cores of their particular disciplines.[7]

[7] H. S. Irlen, "On the Sowing of Turnips," (See footnote 3)

Certainly no "scientific" data exist which will prove that student needs are being fully met, let alone that our administrative structure facilitates meeting these needs. However, institutional self studies performed in both 1972 and 1973, indicated that students themselves rated their teachers high in areas such as availability and communication.[8]

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[8] See unpublished Institutional Self Studies, R. Edmund Dolan, 1972, and Michael J. Maloney and Bonnie A. Agnew, 1973.

However, if we did not have a cluster organization we would almost inevitably be organized by divisions. It is thus sensible to look closely at those implications.

Cluster vs Division

There are any number of possibilities for redistribution of faculty were we to implement a different type of administrative structure. A first decision would have to be whether or not to separate teachers of vocational students from those of baccalaureate students. With our current faculty that would result in approximately 36 full-time teachers in a vocational division (or department) and a maximum of 28 in any other grouping. Naturally, vocational teachers could be organized into smaller, more discrete groups (possibly the five recognized as distinct areas by D.V.T.E.: health related, business related, applied biological and agriculture, personal and public service, and industrial oriented). More feasible and desirable, I think, would be an organization into divisions which integrate baccalaureate and vo-tech teachers and students, but ones which group <u>like</u> rather than <u>dissimilar</u> disciplines. As a possibility, consider the structure listed below:

1. Life and Health Sciences, including Physical Education, Radiologic Technology, Medical Laboratory Technology, Practical Nursing, Physical Therapist Assistant, Medical Record Technology, Medical Transcription

2. Business, including Data Processing, Secretarial Science

3. Communications, Arts, Humanities, including Philosophy, Music and Foreign Language

4. Physical Science, Engineering, and Mathematics, including Automobile Technology (Apprenticeship), Architectural Technology, Business Machine Repair Technology, Electronics Technology, and Heating and Air Conditioning Technology

5. Social Science and Public Service, including Child Care Services, Fire Science, Hotel-Motel Management, and Law Enforcement

6. Student Development

7. Learning Resources--professionals in library and audio-visual services.

Given these divisions and our current faculty, the numbers would be as follows:

1.	Life and Health Sciences	21	
2.	Business	20	
3.	Communications, Arts, Humanities	27	(no vo-tech here)
4.	Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Mathematics	22	
5.	Social Science and Public Service	14	

6. Student Development	12
7. Learning Resources	4
	120

Naturally these numbers would vary from year to year with Life and Health Sciences growing rapidly. Divisions #6 and #7 could be eliminated, the former reporting directly to the Vice President for Student Development or to various division chairmen, the latter reporting to the LRC director. This variation would give us five divisions, the same number we have projected as learning clusters.

Some of the advantages of such a divisional structure are listed below:

1. Interchange among teachers. Teachers grouped together have similar training, are thus easily able to "compare notes."

2. Budget building. Disciplines have similar needs, especially equipment. Easy to coordinate in a division.

3. Student counseling for majors. Although more a point in a senior college, students with like majors may be more easily counseled in a division than in a cluster arrangement.

4. Facilities construction. Specialized spaces such as labs can be built within the division itself and not spread all over the college.

5. Public understanding. It is always more acceptable to go with the grain. Everyone who has had association with college knows what a department or division is; few have heard of clusters.

6. Curriculum coordination. With disciplines linked together within divisions it is relatively easy to discuss, vote on, or generally maintain quality control of curriculum.

7. Evaluation of faculty. One theory says that English teachers must be evaluated by English teachers and on down the line. In this regard divisions are "better" than clusters, not as good as departments.

Some of the disadvantages of divisions:

1. Uneven size. There is no way of keeping divisions equal or even similar in size. This results in difficulties in span of control and cost inefficiency.

2. Pressure groups. Divisions tend to compete against one another for budget and for faculty power. Tendency is to band together to "sell" their vested interest to the administration.

3. Usefulness to students. Community college students seldom have decided on majors (except in vo-tech areas) in their first two years. They must take many subjects and are thus not "subject oriented." The division to them is only a place.

4. Curricular expansion. Although useful as a forum for discussion, etc., of individual subject or related subjects, divisional organization slows down, or at least does not encourage, development of truly inter-disciplinary teaching strategies. Whether or not division members believe or support it, divisions offer symbolic evidence that knowledge is compartmentalized.

5. Insularity. This is evident in three of the items above. However, it is perhaps the greatest disadvantage of the divisional structure. Divisions foster a sense of autonomy among faculty that at least results in a semiphysical isolation from the diversity that exists among a faculty, to most ends in smugness and singleness of purpose.

6. Cost. Simply put, it is more expensive to administratively staff a divisional structure than a cluster college. A common and inevitable rule of thumb is that the more students, the more administration. However, most community colleges have between six and ten divisions (some have as many as thirty!).[8]

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[8] John Lombardi, "The Department/Division Structure in the Community College," Topical Paper #38, ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Dec., 1973, p. 1.

This is a basic number. As enrollment grows assistant chairmen or other administrators or quasi-administrators are usually added. In a cluster college the number of administrators will also vary with faculty and student enrollment, but it will nearly always be below the number, and thus the cost, of a departmental or divisional school.

Cost

Since cost is so often mentioned as a key factor in determining how to administer a college, a comparison may be valuable here. In the spring of 1975, the College of Lake County had 7200 head count students, 3200 FTE. Oakton enrolled 4747 students for an FTE of 2534. In the areas of instruction and student services, Lake County employed 22 administrators. Oakton had 13. Lake County has essentially the same instructional programs and services as does Oakton, but is organized into six instructional divisions. Looking at the number of administrators to FTE students, Oakton would have 17 administrators by ratio with College of Lake County. The contrast between the two schools is even more dramatic when it is noted that Oakton is growing at a much more rapid rate than the College of Lake County.

I do not want to belabor the point, but the fact is that Oakton taxpayers are getting a bargain with Oakton's cluster system. A recent monograph, which incidentally mentions Oakton a number of times, makes

this point, "In fact, the notion of profit centers that is used in the industrial section becomes a viable cost control strategy for cluster college systems. Also, cluster colleges pride themselves on the streamlining of administration through elimination of divisional and departmental chair positions and the thinning out of top line positions."[10]

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[10] Barry Heerman, "Organizational Breakthrough in the Community College," Topical Paper #47, ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Nov., 1974, p. 15.

Heerman lists eight "advantages" of a cluster type organization:

1. Achieves new levels of interpersonal relations by removing artificial barriers.
2. Fosters an internalization of the Community/Junior College philosophy.
3. Provides new stature for occupational education.
4. Allows important operating economies.
5. Manifests the notion of interdependent real-world systems in the college program.
6. Copes better with rapid institutional growth.
7. Students benefit from competing cluster offerings.
8. Positions important student services near students and not in remote centralized facilities.[11]

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[11] Barry Heerman, "Organizational Breakthrough in the Community College," pp. 15-16. (See footnote 10)

All eight of Mr. Heerman's advantages are applicable to Oakton. By implementing the cluster system at the front end, Oakton was able to avoid some of the insularity and static qualities of traditionally structured colleges. Again Heerman: "Change is slow, and that is part of the excitement about innovative two-year colleges such as Northampton, Oakton and DuPage."[12]

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[12] Barry Heerman, "Organizational Breakthrough in the Community College," p.27 (See footnote 10)

Oakton is an exciting place to work and to learn. Its teacher evaluation system, accompanied by a solid job security policy but no such thing as tenure, its interdisciplinary courses, and its instructional options are working; and they are, we think, results of our structure. That structure is ideally suited to our missions, the development and maintenance of "a humanistic learning climate where confluent education, the integration of intellectual and subjective awareness, takes place."[13]

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[13] Oakton Community College Self Study Report, submitted to the Commission of Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, May, 1975, p. 14.

In our case form does indeed follow function.

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